



USDA Labor-Management Relations Update (LMRU)

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Mission

The Mission of the USDA Office of Human Resources Management Labor Relations program is to provide expert advice and assistance to all levels of USDA staff and management, especially Labor Relations practitioners, so they are better able to meet their LR obligations while accomplishing the program goals of their Mission Areas and Offices.

USDA LR Practitioner Survey

The past two issues of the *Update* contained progress reports on actions being initiated by what has become known as the Labor Relations Pay Equity Team (**Cheryl Dunham**-FSIS, **Noreen Joice** (FSA-KC), **Mike Stein** (FSA-DC), and **Pete Rockx**- (OHRM). Whereas progress continues to be made in all five pieces of a five-part action plan to address the issue of how to improve the recruitment and retentions of LR practitioners in USDA, this issue will focus on preliminary results from the practitioner survey many of you completed during the past month. To date, 30 out of 46 surveys have been completed, with the final cutoff for submissions December 19, 2003. Following are highlights of findings based on a first cut review of those surveys:

- Most of the respondents are in GS-12 or 13 positions, located in agency headquarters
- Most have been in their positions less than 5 years
- Nearly half have come to USDA in the last five years from other Federal agencies
- Dominant factors affecting the decision to accept their current job were: promotion/promotion potential, alignment with career goals, challenging work and increased pay/financial incentives.
- A significant majority (over 70%); know what is expected to succeed, see their jobs as contributing to the agency's success, and believe their views/opinions are valued.
- Only half believe their position descriptions are accurate, and only 20% believe their positions are classified at grades comparable with other agencies.
- Over half are actively seeking other employment opportunities and less than half expect to be in their present position in the next three years.

Once all the survey results have been analyzed, a report along with recommendations will be presented to the Mission Area Human Resources Directors. This is expected to occur in February '04. Also pending is a survey being administered to former USDA Labor Relations practitioners who left their positions within the past three years. Results of that survey are expected to be prepared in January 2004.

New Faces in New Places within USDA Labor Relations

Welcome to the following newcomers to USDA Labor Relations:

Tracey Gallaway, APHIS, Labor Relations Specialist, has returned after a short stint with the Department of Homeland Security.

Pearlette Pullen, FNS, Labor and Employee Relations Specialist, International Trade Association.

Jack Burns, ARS, Labor Relations Officer, moved over from ARS employee relations.

USDA Labor Relations Strategic Plan

A team, chaired by **Ruthie Jackson**, USDA Chief Human Capital Officer, has completed the USDA Labor Relations strategic plan and expects to present it to the Acting Assistant Secretary for Administration by the end of December. Creation of a Labor Relations strategic plan is one of three Departmental labor relations action strategies targeted at meeting Goal 9 contained in the USDA Human Capital Plan. That goal is:

Prevent and successfully resolve employee disputes and maintain effective working relationships with labor organizations.

The strategic plan is intended to articulate how the labor relations aspects of significant cross cutting issues like competitive sourcing will be addressed at the Department level in the future.

Labor and Employee Relations Automated Tracking and Reporting System (LERACTRS)

Although it'll never gain the notoriety of such infamous HR acronyms as CULPRPT or FOCUS, USDA employee and labor relations practitioners know more about LERACTRS than they did a few months ago. On December 11, over 40 practitioners representing all but one Mission Area attended a demonstration of LERACTRS led by **Richard Reyes** (FSIS, HR Specialist), who is the principal architect of this MSAccess application. Richard is part of a multi-Mission Area/OHRM team (other members are **Tom Valenti** (APHIS), **Bernie Freeman** (FS), **Jeff Shen** (OHRM), **Keith Prue** (OHRM) and **Pete Rockx** (OHRM)) who are working on this project to develop and deploy a Department-wide automated tracking and reporting system for most ER and LR cases. The program demonstrated is the currently being used by FSIS, as well as being utilized in part by APHIS and the Forest Service in their Washington Office.

Reaction from the participants was favorable, with a number of useful suggestions offered to the team. Soft copies of handouts distributed during the demo have since been sent out to the Mission Areas along with a request soliciting additional comments by January 30, 2004.

Based on feedback received to date, the team has taken steps to pursue "webifying" the program, ensure compatibility with the labor and employee component of I-CAMS, and exploring options for linking to or incorporating an EEO complaint tracking component.

Next Quarterly USDA LRO Meeting Set – February 4, 2004

Please mark your calendars and plan to attend the next LRO meeting set for Wednesday, February 4, 2004, starting at 1:30pm. Location is to be determined.

Service Center Agency (SCA) IT Convergence

Question: How do you create a new Department level organization within OCIO and staff it with over 600 employees from three USDA agencies under transfer of function rules – while at the same time maintaining service delivery and meeting labor-management obligations with 30 bargaining units who represent a portion of the affected employees - without getting ensnarled in formal labor disputes?

This question summarizes the challenge being undertaken by OCIO, Natural Resources Conservation Agency (NRCS), Rural Development (RD) and Farm Service Agency (FSA). Since the early summer of '03, the LR IT Team along with two other teams has been working to address the many aspects of implementing the SCA IT Convergence. The LR IT Team has been focused on coordinating collective bargaining efforts, information sharing with unions and will be the focal point for dealing with anticipated representation issues. The process has entered the collective bargaining phase, with notices given by the three agencies to their respective units, and proposals are beginning to be received. Those involved in this effort will no doubt have a story to tell when the project is completed – lessons learned - to be shared with others, so that there will be answers to similar questions in the future.

USDA Labor-Management Relations Training

On November 21, 2003, the third class of USDA “students” (and one from the DOI-Bureau of Land Management) graduated from the five-day course: *Labor-Management Relations for Human Resources Practitioners*. As with the previous two classes held during the year, course evaluations reflected high marks for the quality and relevance of materials presented. A special thanks goes to **Debra Donnelly** (FSA), **Mike Stein** (FSA), **Ed Fisher** (FS), **Becky Cash** (RD), and **Jim Keim** (RD) who served as guest instructors. Although no dates have been set for the next time this course will be given, plans are to offer it again some time in late spring '04.

Official Time Census

In an effort to achieve greater accountability in the area of granting and using official time for union-related activities, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), has requested agencies report the number of hours used by union officials in FY '03. This annual reporting requirement was initiated by OPM last year, and will be tracked in greater detail in future years. In FY '02, USDA agencies reported a total of 127,188 hours, which represented an average of 2.92 hours per bargaining unit employee, significantly below the Government-

wide average of 4.21 hours. Preliminary data generated from NFC time and attendance reports for FY '03 indicates official time usage within USDA to remain about the same. In addition to gathering official time hours from agencies, OPM is conducting a special study of the official time practices within agencies having bargaining units of over 10,000 employees. Within USDA, the Forest Service is one of ten agencies Government-wide who will be participating in the study by virtue of having the NFFE-Forest Service Council (a consolidated unit with approximately 20,000 employees). Reports of official time hours are due from USDA agencies on January 9, 2004, in response to an OHRM Director memo dated December 4, 2003.

SFLERP Contemplating LR Certification Program

The Society of Federal Labor and Employee Relations Professionals (SFLERP) is currently considering establishing a certification program in Federal Labor Relations and is actively soliciting comments from agencies to determine interest. Key questions appear to whether agencies would send employees to training offered through such a program and whether credentialed employees would be viewed by selecting officials as being more competitive. Feedback can be submitted to SFLERP at sflerp@sflerp.org or **Mike Stein** (SFLERP Board Member) at Michael.Stein@wdc.usda.gov.

ILRF Meeting – January 15, 2004

The Interagency Labor Relation Forum (ILRF) will hold its next meeting on January 15 at 1:30pm in the South Agriculture cafeteria meeting room. The presenter will **Kurt Saunders**, a Commissioner with the FMCS, who will talk about the various programs and ways the FMCS can assist agencies in meeting their LMR obligations and needs. They do much more than just mediating negotiations. ILRF meetings are open to any Federal LR practitioner.

Seasons Greetings!

As 2003 draws to an end, many of us in the USDA labor relations community look forward to some well-deserved time off to spend with friends and family. This is also a time to reflect back on accomplishments for the year, what we've learned, and to express thanks to those who have contributed in making our program and profession a bit better. Thank you ...

The USDA LMRU is issued periodically by the USDA Office of Human Resources Management s (OHRM) Program, Policy and Partnership Division as a method and means to highlight significant events occurring in the federal Labor Relations profession within the Department. It will also contain what we believe to be useful LMR information received by the USDA from other federal agencies and outside sources that may not be readily available to the Mission Area Labor Relations community. Readers are encouraged to submit questions, suggested topics and LMR news to improve the utility of the LMRU. Queries and comments should be sent to peter.rockx@usda.gov.